

Public Stakeholders and the Cleanup of Moffett Field

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My name is Lenny Siegel. Many people know me for my work at the Center for Public Environmental Oversight and my participation in state, regional, and national committees reviewing cleanup policies and programs. However, I started out in this field as a local activist, and I remain active in my own community, Mountain View, California, adjacent to the former Moffett Naval Air Station. I was a member of the Moffett Field Technical Review Committee (TRC) when it was formed in 1990. I remained active when the TRC transformed into a Restoration Advisory Board (RAB) in 1995. I am a member of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, as well as its Community Advisory Board for its technical assistance grants at Moffett Field and adjacent Superfund sites. And I am a founder and officer of the Alliance for a New Moffett Field, a grassroots group based in Mountain View and Sunnyvale with over four hundred member households.

Moffett Field has long been regarded as a model for public participation in the oversight of cleanup. In fact, the Federal Facilities Environmental Restoration Dialogue Committee relied heavily upon the Moffett experience in developing its proposal for Site-Specific Advisory Boards. Though community representatives, regulators, and the Navy do not always agree, our positive working relationship appears to have built a protective, efficient cleanup program at Moffett Field.

There are three principal reasons for this success:

1) Key Navy people—first base commander Capt. Tim Quigley and later Base Environmental Coordinator Steve Chao—understood the value of working with and listening to the community.

2) Though by no means homogeneous, the communities around Moffett Field have a high proportion of well-educated, politically empowered people who care about the physical environment.

3) Even before contamination was reported at Moffett Field, community members had “cut their teeth” fighting pollution at adjacent private properties. The Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition united unaffiliated residents, public health professionals, conservationists, and labor union leaders and developed a high level of organizational and technical expertise.

Success breeds success. When members of the community learned to expect the Navy to consider their concerns seriously, they approached the Navy with a much more confident, positive attitude.

Community members developed their own priorities for the Moffett Field cleanup. For example, when the Toxics Coalition received its U.S. EPA Technical Assistance Grants for Moffett Field and the adjacent “MEW” Study Area, it invited other interests, including local

government representatives. to sit on its Community Advisory Board for the project. That group, with the aid of technical consultant Peter Strauss, studied the two areas and consciously set priorities for the Toxics Coalition and for Strauss. While activists participated in the RAB's oversight off all cleanup activities at Moffett, they focused their resources in three areas:

1) Protecting the local drinking water supply. Contamination from the regional plume of volatile organic compounds threatens the aquifers that supply the city of Mountain View with a portion of its water. Activists insisted that the Navy's groundwater cleanup be integrated with the MEW companies' extraction system, and that U.S. EPA better coordinate its oversight of the private and federal parties. Ironically, since private parties are not required to work with community advisory groups, participation in the Navy RAB gave community members their best opportunities to interact with people responsible for the private party cleanup. While pushing hard for cleanup of potential drinking water supplies, community members were willing to accept lower levels of activity for groundwater that is not potable due to significant saltwater intrusion.

2) Protecting the San Francisco Bay and its wetlands. Moffett Field, like many other Bay Area Naval bases, abuts the San Francisco Bay. In fact, if NASA—the new owner of most of the former Naval Air Station—were to turn off the pump at Building 191, about a third of the Moffett runway surface would flood because it is below sea level. The community accepted capping (and later consolidation) as the remedy for landfills near the Bay, but only after receiving assurances that the cap would be comparable to the cap required at nearby municipal landfills and that there would be careful monitoring for leachate, with trigger levels for additional action. More recently, the community pushed successfully for more protective ecological risk levels in the base's wetlands areas.

3) Preserving flexibility of reuse. Community members overseeing the Moffett cleanup, despite differences over the potential future uses of the property, always insisted that most of the base be cleaned to allow unrestricted use. There was consensus on this in the community, even though the federal government remains the near-term and possibly long-term owner. Except for the landfills, an active tank farm, and the actual location of wells and other remediation equipment, cleanup to unrestricted use will likely be achieved.

In 1996 NASA proposed to open up the airfield to night flights by private air package express firms. Community opposition shot that proposal down, and in cooperation with NASA, the cities of Sunnyvale and Mountain View established a Community Advisory Committee to recommend uses to NASA. During the deliberations of that committee, the Moffett RAB community co-chair briefed the the Advisory Committee (of which he was also a member), describing Moffett's contamination, cleanup progress, and long-term goals. In essence, he said that the Navy was doing a good job, so we as a community shouldn't feel that we were stuck with commercial aviation because the property was too dirty for anything else.

About that time, I led a workshop for activists living near the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, where base neighbors are also opposing a commercial aviation proposal. After touring the base with them and receiving a briefing from the Navy and Marines, I suggested that they take the same position. The Navy and Marines are doing a good job on cleanup, so they don't have to accept undesirable future uses. They seemed genuinely surprised to hear that it might be in their interests to say something favorable about the military!

Not all issues at Moffett Field have been resolved. If I ever win the battle to shut down the pump at Building 191 and restore the entire Moffett wetlands area, some of the remedies will have to be reconsidered. Given the limitations of technology and resources, Moffett Field will never be as clean as it was before the Navy, NASA, and electronics industry released hazardous substances into the local environment.

Nevertheless, most of us in the local community believe that Navy, other responsible parties, and the regulators have listened to us. In return, we have supported efforts to test and use innovative technologies, as well as other efficiency measures in the cleanup program. We have not always agreed, but we have worked out our differences. We have helped build a protective, efficient cleanup program.

We expect soon to start shifting into a long-term monitoring mode, in which the community will remain active, but that meetings will occur less often and fewer reports will be written. We want to ensure that the small number of institutional controls—such as restrictions on tree-planting at the landfill and the continued operation of the pump—are enforced as long as needed.

I leave you with one concern, a problem that pits the internal efficiency of the military against the needs of the community for continuing and accountability. It's a concern that's showing up at other bases. I've heard that the Navy Facilities Engineering Command plans to shut down its facility in San Bruno, about 20 miles from Moffett Field. This is where the Navy staff that runs the cleanup at Moffett, as well as other Bay Area facilities, resides. If the Navy plans to move project management to San Diego, I fear it will undermine the working relationship that it has with the community, and without having talked to any of the Navy personnel, I fear that some may abandon their Navy work rather than move from the area. As long as there is a concentration of Navy cleanup activity in the Bay Area, there should be a local presence.